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ABSTRACT

Ways in which mothers adjust the explicitness of their speech to the capabilities of their children were explored among 38 mothers and 40 of their children. All children ranged in age from 1 1/2 to 3 1/2 years. Children were grouped by mean age in 6-month intervals, with eight subjects per group, and paired with their mothers. Each mother-child pair participated in a 1/2-hour naturalistic interaction focused on the child's toys. Two observers each taped on separate tape recorders whenever the mother made a verbal request for any action. Six months later, 15 of the mother-child pairs, three at each mean age, participated in a second session conducted like the first. Identified action-directives were classified into one of three sub-types: Standard Imperatives, Embedded Imperatives, and Implied Action-Directives. The results show a simple progression: the less sophisticated the child, the more explicit the mother's speech to him or her. Cross-sectional analyses show that Standard Imperatives declined significantly with increases in the child's age. Implied Action-Directives increased in a linear fashion with the child's age. Embedded Imperatives increased to age 2 1/2 and then decreased. Longitudinal analyses indicate that mothers used a significantly lower proportion of Standard Imperatives and a significantly greater proportion of Implied Action-Directives in the second session than they had in the first. The change in Embedded Imperatives was consistent with the cross-sectional analysis. The analysis of maternal repetition sequences indicated that mothers used a more explicit sub-type when children failed to obey less explicit sub-types. (Author/RH)

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"If That's What You Mean, Why Didn't You Say So?": Differential Uses of Maternal Action-Directive Sub-Types

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SRCD, 1981

How do mothers get their children to do things? More technically, I would like to discuss the change in explicitness in maternal action-directives, where an action-directive is any utterance where the speaker intends the listener to perform some action. Mothers use many syntactic devices to express an action-directive meaning (Shatz, 1978a; Bellinger, 1979). Subsequently, the child has to learn that utterances such as "Can you pick up your blocks?" (which literally means "Do you have the ability to pick up your blocks?") might be intended to mean "Pick up your blocks!" According to Searle (1975), listeners must be able to perform complicated inferential analyses in order to master non-literal action-directives. This must be an incredibly hard task for a child who is limited in inferential skills.

But, luckily for the child who has difficulty drawing inferences, some sub-types of action-directives require fewer inferences than others. As illustrated in Table 1, I have classified maternal action-directives into

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Insert Table 1 here

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one of three sub-types which differ in the explicitness to which they express action-directive intentions. They are listed from most to least explicit: Standard Imperatives, Embedded Imperatives, and Implied Action-Directives

Only syntactic imperatives (e.g., "Pick up your blocks!" were classified as Standard Imperatives. This sub-type is the only one which can be decoded non-inferentially because its syntax literally means act and its words explicitly refer to the contents of the action to be performed.

The other sub-types require some inferences to be decoded as action-directives because their literal interpretations mean something else; they

are non-literal action-directives. Embedded Imperatives (e.g., "Can you pick up your blocks?") do not express the imperative syntax, but they contain the syntactic imperative, thus naiming the action. Implied Action-Directives (e.g., "Your blocks are on the floor.") are not imperatives and they do not name the action to be performed; a listener must make many inferences to decode these as action-directives.

In sum, Standard Imperatives are literal and referentially explicit, hence they require no inferences to be interpreted as action-directives. Embedded Imperatives are non-literal and referentially explicit; they require inferences as to request force only. Implied Action-Directives are non-literal and referentially inexplicit, so they require inferences as to the contents of the action as well as to request force.

The question I have investigated is whether the mother helps the child relate the sentences which mean the same thing, by adjusting her style of speech to her perception of her child's ability to draw complex inferences. In this work, I will report a study of the changes in the explicitness of mothers' action-directives and outline the way the results support several models concerned with the explicitness (Ervin-Tripp, 1977) and/or complexity (Searle, 1975) of action-directive sub-types.

The subjects were 38 mothers and 40 of their children. Two of the mothers had two children of different ages in the study. All children ranged in age from 1-1/2- to 3-1/2- years and were grouped in six month intervals with eight subjects per group.

Each mother-child pair participated in a one-half-hour naturalistic

interaction focussed on the child's toys. Two observers each tapped on separate tape recorders whenever the mother made a verbal request for any action. Six months later, 15 of the mother-child pairs, three at each mean age, participated in a second session conducted like the first.

The interobserver reliability was 91.4%. These reliably identified action-directives were classified into one of the three sub-types I had described: Standard Imperatives, Embedded Imperatives, and Implied Action-Directives. The results show a simple progression : the less sophisticated the child the more explicit the speech to him/her.

I will present three sources of evidence that mothers share these intuitions regarding the speech that is easiest to understand. There is evidence from cross-sectional and longitudinal trends that mothers use the explicit sub-types to the youngest children, and evidence from maternal repetition sequences that mothers rephrase action-directives in a more explicit sub-type when children fail to obey the action-directive encoded less explicitly.

The first source of evidence I will describe is the cross-sectional changes. Figure 1 shows that cross-sectionally Standard Imperatives declined

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Insert Figure 1 here
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significantly with increases in the child's age, $F=3.00$ (4,35) $p<.05$. There is a slight increase between ages 3- and 3-1/2-years, but it is not significant by a Tukey B posthoc comparison ($p<.05$). Implied Action-Directives increased linearly with child-age, $F=5.625$ (4,35) $p<.005$.

The change in Embedded Imperatives did not reach statistical significance, F=0.750 (4,35) n.s. Embedded Imperatives increased to age 2-1/2-, and then they decreased. A trend analysis showed that there was a significant quadratic trend, F=4.179 (1,35), $p < .05$. This suggests that Embedded Imperatives will continue to decrease and will eventually cross the Implied Action-Directive line with further increases in the child's age.

There is an interesting side-effect. That is, for the two mothers who had two children in the study,the effects were the same. More Standard Imperatives, and more Embedded Imperatives, and fewer Implied Action-Directives to the younger sibling.

The second source of evidence comes from a longitudinal analysis. For the 15 subjects seen twice, I took difference scores on the measures I just described, to see whether individual mothers used a greater proportion of inexplicit speech on the second session. Figure 2 shows that these results

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Insert Figure 2 here
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support the cross-sectional trends.

Mothers used a significantly lower proportion of Standard Imperatives (t=2.828, df=14, $p < .02$) and a significantly greater proportion of Implied Action-Directives on the second session than they had on the first,(t=4.00, df=14, $p < .005$. The change in Embedded Imperatives is also consistent with the cross-sectional analysis, t=1.496, df=14, n.s. Mothers of children who were 1-1/2- and 2-years-old on the first session (i.e., 2- and 2-1/2- on the second session) increased their use of Embedded Imperatives. Mothers of children who were 2-1/2-, 3-, and 3-1/2-years-old (i.e., 3-, 3-1/2-, and 4-

on the second session) decreased their proportion of Embedded Imperatives.

To summarize the developmental findings: the first action-directives children hear are Standard Imperatives. Standard Imperatives are replaced in part by Embedded Imperatives. Embedded Imperatives are in turn replaced by Implied Action-Directives.

The third source of evidence that mothers' speech is adjusted to their perception of their children's comprehension level, comes from an analysis of maternal repetition sequences. When the children did not obey, mothers often rephrased their action-directives and tried again. They might say: "Your blocks are on the floor."; "Why don't you pick up your blocks?"; "Can you pick up your blocks?"; "Pick up your blocks!" The analysis I am going to describe showed that mothers used a more explicit sub-type when children failed to obey the less explicit sub-type.

For each mother I divided each of her repetition sequences in half and I compared the frequency with which some sub-type (e.g., Standard Imperatives) appeared in the first half versus the frequency with which the same sub-type (i.e., Standard Imperatives) appeared in the second half of the sequence. On each measure I found that speech in the second half was more literal and more referentially explicit than speech in the first half.

There were significantly more Standard Imperatives in the second half than there were in the first when Standard Imperatives were compared against both non-literal sub-types, $t=9.017$, $df=39$, $p < .0001$; 23% in the first half versus 76% in the second. When non-literal action-directives were sub-divided into Embedded Imperatives and Implied Action-Directives

I got the same effects. More Standard Imperatives in the second half than in the first when Standard Imperatives were compared against either Embedded Imperatives ($\underline{t}$=4.443, df=39, $\underline{p} < .001$) or Implied Action-Directives, $\underline{t}$=5.392, df=39, $\underline{p} < .001$. There were more Embedded Imperatives in the second half when Embedded Imperatives were compared against only the Implied Action-Directives, $\underline{t}$=3.725, df=39, $\underline{p} < .01$. Clearly then, mothers believed that issuing Standard Imperatives maximizes comprehension and ultimately cmmpliance.

Overall, the present study reveals information about mothers' competence. Mothers seem able to make distinctions between literal and non-literal speech, and between referentially explicit and referentially inexplicit speech. In agreement with Searle (1975), the mothers seemed to believe that speech which is both literal and referentially explicit will be easier to understand; probably because it requires the listener to make very few, if any, extra-linguistic inferences to arrive at the conveyed action-directive meaning. For a child deficient in inferential skills, non-inferential explicit speech certainly seems most appropriate.

In conclusion I suggest that these adjustments may help children to understand the speech they are hearing. It is possible that the mother places an inferential filter on her speech. It would filter the inferences a child would have to make to interpret the utterances s/he hears. To children who can not make inferences, mothers restrict their input to Standard Imperatives which can be decoded non-inferentially. To children perceived as capable of some inferential analyses, mothers believe they can afford a bit

of flexibility, so they relax the inferential filter to allow Embedded Imperatives to pass, in addition to the Standard Imperatives. To inferentially sophisticated children, mothers may remove the filter and issue roughly equivalent proportions of all three sub-types.

Let me conclude finally by saying that the mother's language must certainly influence the child's development, but the results of this study suggest that we should not ignore the influence of the child's development on his/her mother's speech style.

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Table 1

Sub-Types of Maternal Action-Directives

(ordered in terms of decreasing explicitness)

Standard Imperatives:

Literal, Referentially Explicit

e.g., "Pick up your blocks!"

Embedded Imperatives:

Non-literal; Referentially Explicit

e.g., "Why don't you pick up your blocks?"

"I wish you'd pick up your blocks."

Implied Action-Directives:

Non-literal; Referentially Inexplicit

e.g., "Where do your blocks go?"

"Your blocks are on the floor."

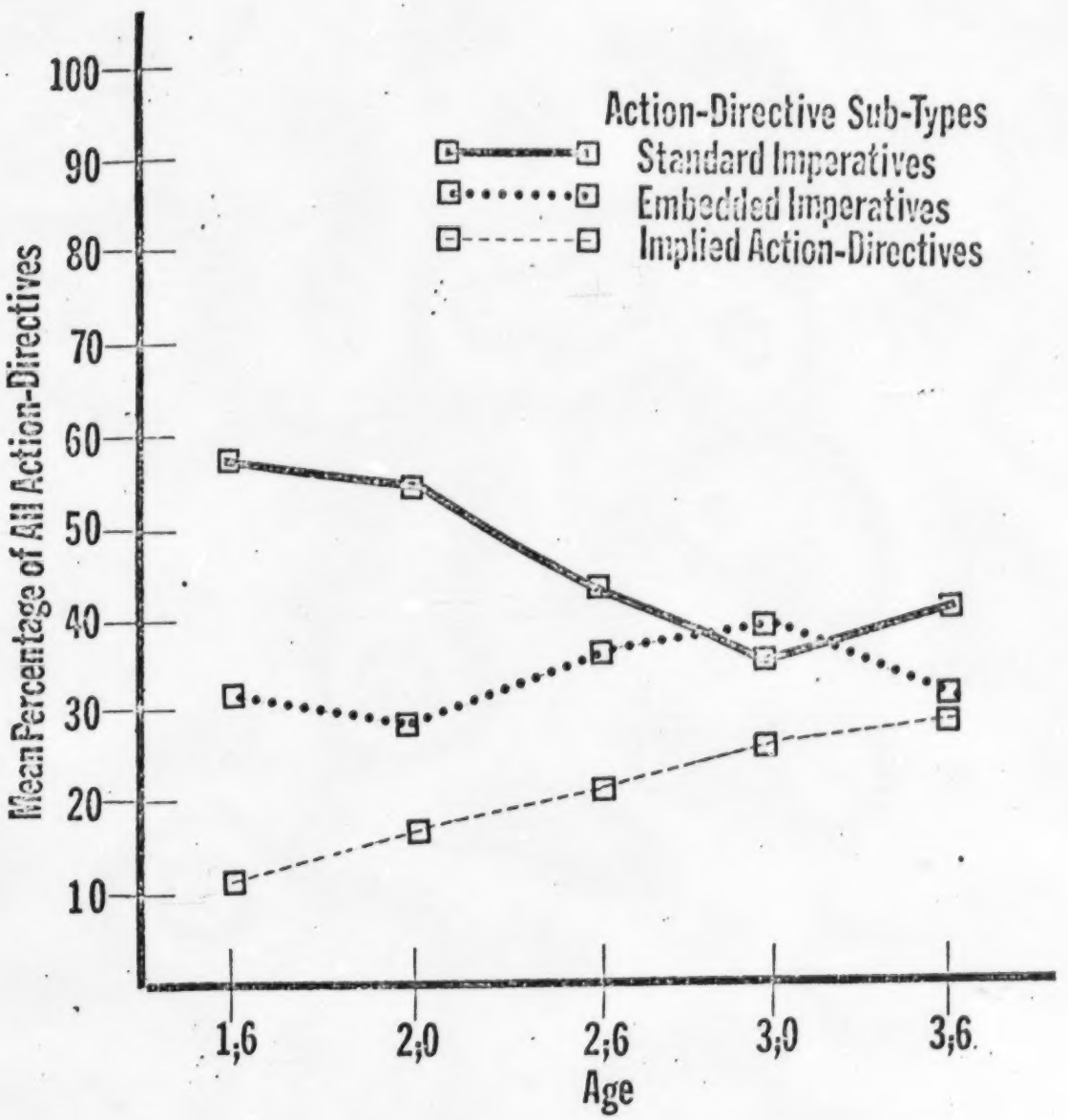

Figure 1: Cross-sectional changes in the percentages of each maternal action-directive sub-type by the age of the child.

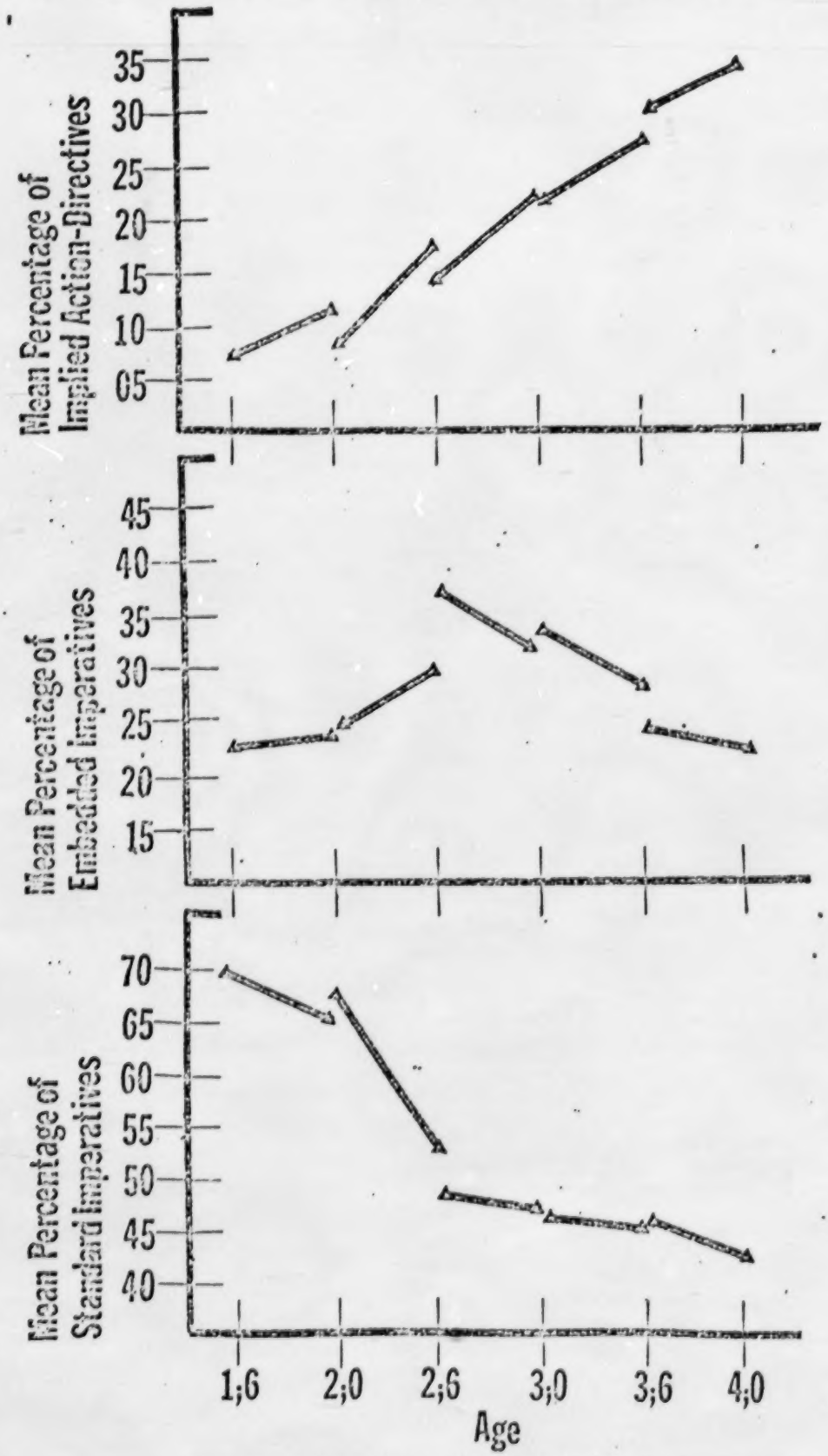

Figure 2: Longitudinal changes in the percentages of each maternal action-directive sub-type by the age of the child.